



# "Beginning Irish Banjo: Reels"

by [Michael Keyes](#)

For most of us, reels are the most familiar form of Irish music because the dance traditions we know use reels as their basic music. As a result we start off learning Irish traditional music (ITM) with a head start. Unfortunately that head start is often in the wrong direction.

Irish music is dance music. When you play it you want both feet to start moving on their own as opposed to tapping along with the rhythm. This is called "lilt" and is characteristic of ITM.

The other thing that is distinctive about Irish reels is that they don't have to be played so fast that the fabric of the universe is warped. The music was "played to the slowest dancer" in the old days and there are still regional styles that play slowly but with lilt.

There is a tendency to play reels at warp 10, especially in sessions, but it doesn't have to be and as a beginner you won't have the ability to play that fast anyway. It is better to learn the tune, learn the pulse of the tune, and then learn to play it a little faster. The rule of thumb is that if you are playing for a group of dancers and your pace caused a heart attack, you are playing too fast.

I mentioned above that it is not an advantage to have played a reel in another style. In spite of the myth that North American styles of music are the children of ITM, there are only a few crossover tunes out there. Two that I played a lot before I became interested in ITM are "Mrs. McLeods Reel" and "St. Anne's Reel" which are both popular session tunes. To this day I cannot play them in the Irish style because I learned them as breakdowns. (As an aside, neither of them are originally Irish, one is Scottish, the other French-Canadian, but that just goes to show you how much the Irish like music.) I have a tendency to play them fast without the lilt. An Irish dancer would have a hard time keeping up.

So let's look at these issues, lilt and speed, and figure out how to make them work for you.

## Lilt

Irish dance music has a pulsing but smooth rhythm that drives the music and makes it sound faster than it really is. Usually it is written in 4/4 timing but there is an emphasis on the third and seventh beats (1-2-three-4, 5-6,-seven-8) which "pushes" the tune for the dancers. This is not the same as the backbeat mandolin chop heard in bluegrass, it is more subtle and less driving. It is often achieved by ornamentation (usually the triplet on a banjo) rather than an increase in volume and the emphasis is on the beat rather than just before it. To be honest, they are very close but quite distinct when you hear them juxtaposed.

Here is an example using "Silver Spear", a popular session tune played first in Irish style and then as a breakdown.

### **The Silver Spear Slow**

Download the Movie: [SilverSpearSlow.mov](#)

### **The Silver Spear Fast**

Download the Movie: [SilverSpearFast.mov](#)

### **The Silver Spear in D**

Download the Movie: [SilverSpearInD.mov](#)

Learning the difference between the two styles is probably the hardest thing to do if you are making the transition to Irish music. The secret is to listen to the music and to know it very well before you play it. I always suggest that you be able to sing the music before you play it. The Irish have a style of singing called "Lilting" in which they make all the ornamentations with their voice. Good lilters can play for a dance using voice alone. You could sing the first phrase of "Silver Spear" as "dai-di-diddley, dum-diddley" with the emphasis slightly on the "diddlies." This would give you a good idea of how the music should be played.

Another good way to learn the music is to try a tune in a different key. Not only will you develop a better feel for the fret board, but you will be able to hear the music better since you have to concentrate on playing the notes rather than reflexly playing the tune. As you listen to your playing you can begin to hear variations that you might have overlooked in the original key.

# The Silver Spear

♩ = 155

The image shows a musical score for 'The Silver Spear' in treble clef, 3/4 time. It consists of six staves of music. The first staff begins with a tempo marking of ♩ = 155. The music is a reel, characterized by its rhythmic patterns and ornamentation. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Rhythm: Reel

Notes: Arranged By Michael J. Keyes, MD

Above all, try to play along with good recordings of the music.

## Speed

In spite of my entreaties that “Speed kills” everyone wants to play faster. (Even John Carty once said in class, “I wish I could play faster.”) The natural tendency is to speed up the music because it is a music with a lot of drive. What happens is that the faster you go, the worse your tone is and the fewer distinctive or interesting ornaments are used. As a result, each iteration of the tune sounds just like the last one and that one wasn’t very interesting.

Of course, that is not going to stop anyone from playing fast, so here is a game plan:

Speed is a byproduct of good technique and good technique is hallmarked by good tone. Good tone can only be achieved by consistent right hand methods and a coordinated left hand. None of these techniques can be developed unless you start out slowly.

So you have to start out slowly, build up your techniques, relax in the process, play your tunes, and one day you will be playing faster. If you decide that speed is the only thing, you will play faster but you will sound terrible, you will have no technical skills (other than counting faster than the next guy), and you will not be a good musician. Your choice. At some point you will not be able to play faster and the person who developed tone and technique will surpass you.

Once you have a good technique there is nothing to stop you from playing quickly other than good taste.

Here is John Carty playing “Wise Maid.” Because of his pace and his lilt he is able to play numerous variations and keep the drive going.

## Wise Maid

Download the Movie: [WiseMaid.mov](#)

# Wise Maid



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## References

"Silver Spear" has been recorded many times. Two good versions of it are from John Carty on his albums "At It Again" and "Last Night's Fun" both of which can be bought from Elderly Instruments (<http://www.elderly.com>).

The CD/book combination "Oil for the Chain", by Shannon Heaton (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/shannonheaton>), is an obscure but wonderful resource for the beginning ITM player. It reads like a Master's thesis in session playing and is obviously influenced by Seamus Connolly, the Irish Music Chair at Boston College and world renowned fiddler. I saw him refuse to play a common tune in a session because he thought it was too fast. Later on he started the same tune at a more reasonable pace and it was wonderful.

Any CD by Angelina Carberry and Martin Quinn (<http://www.reeltrad.com/>) is worth getting. Angelina Carberry is one of the banjoists I most admire and I love her intonation and style. Her pace is moderate and her tone perfect.

Go back in the archives of both the [www.bamjosections.com](http://www.bamjosections.com) and [www.mandolinsessions.com](http://www.mandolinsessions.com) and listen to what Roger Landes, Dr. Chris Smith, and Joe Carr have to say.

My take on the pulse and pace of reels is, of course, subject to discussion. Try The Session at <http://www.thesession.org> for other ideas.

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## About the Author

Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Good Luck." He is an expert in sports performance and has written and book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry.